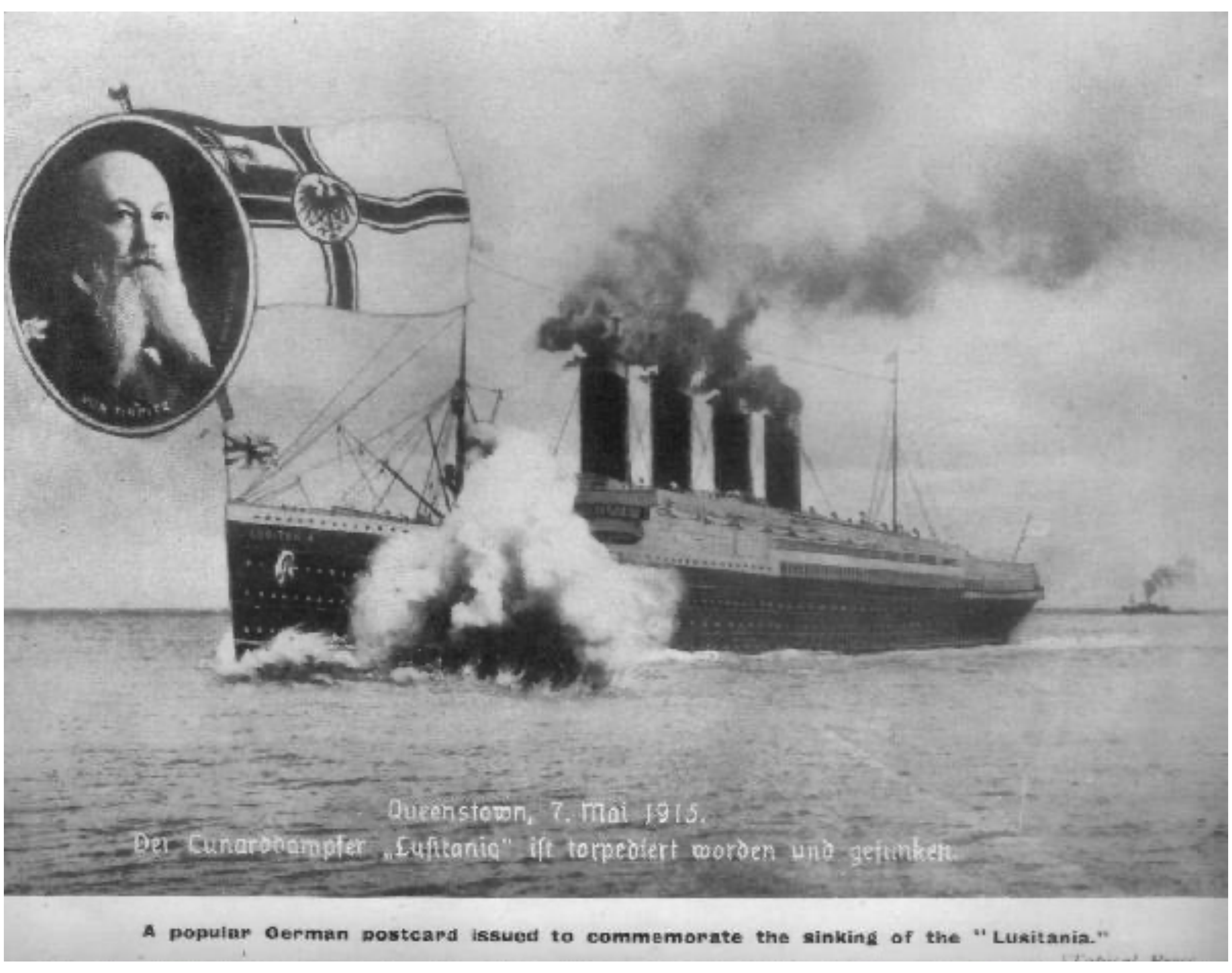
Lusitania Controversy


Queenstown, 7. Mai 1915.
Der Cunardampfer „Luſitania" iſt torpediert worden und geſunken.

A popular German postcard issued to commemorate the sinking of the "Lusitania."

A German propaganda piece, courtesy of Cliff McMullen

Keith Allen (KEACLA1@aol.com) originally posted this multi-part article on WW1-L in March, 1999 - it appears here by permission of the author. It is well worth reading, and provides an excellent summary of the controversies surrounding the loss of the *Lusitania* and the book by Colin Simpson.

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Lusitania Controversy - Introduction and Chronology

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On 10 January Hans Andriessen wrote (on WW1-L), in reference to Colin Simpson's "Lusitania," Bailey and Ryan's "The Lusitania Disaster," and Dr. Ballard's "Exploring the Lusitania":

Since it was a long time ago that I read those books I quitted the discussion and promised to come back after reading this new evidence. So I did. I expected very much since it was said that it would prove without any doubt that Simpson's story was more or less a fraud and that his book was nuts.

Now, I must admit that I am very disappointed. I took both books and compared them with Simpson's book and (I am sure it is my fault) found Simpson's evidence in the most important cases far more convincing and documented than in the other two books. As a matter of fact, I noticed that Bailey & Ryan several times accused Simpson of being incorrect and then gave exactly the same story. I also cannot help but get the impression that Bailey-Ryan wrote their book with the sole purpose to discredit Simpson at all costs but naturally I might be wrong. Now, before I start to document my observations, is there anyone who can give me a solid example in which Bailey and Ryan give clear and undisputable evidence that Simpson was wrong, I mean not small details, but in the real important issues.

Below is a discussion of the controversies surrounding the LUSITANIA disaster, including a comparative look at the books by Simpson and by Bailey and Ryan, as well as discussion of other sources.

Colin Simpson, a British journalist, published "The Lusitania" in 1972. The book was also excerpted in "Life" magazine in the United States, and received a great deal of publicity. Simpson condemned both British and United States policy. He alleged that LUSITANIA carried a large cargo of munitions that was the ultimate cause of her demise. Most sensationally, he postulated that the Admiralty, and in particular First Lord Winston Churchill, had deliberately put LUSITANIA in harm's way to encourage an incident that might bring the United States into the war.

In 1975 Bailey and Ryan's "The Lusitania Disaster: An Episode in Modern Warfare and Diplomacy" appeared, written in part in response to Simpson. Captain Thomas B. Ryan was a retired naval officer. Bailey was one of the leading historians of American foreign policy, and particularly of its political aspects--struggles between President and Congress and the role of the public and press (a liberal dose of editorial cartoons is a trademark of any Bailey book, including this one). Among Bailey's major works were two volumes on the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations fight, "Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace" and "Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal," published in 1944-1945, in which he was highly critical of Wilson's rigidity despite the general tendency at the time to regard Wilson as a sainted martyr of internationalism (as in the 1944 movie, "Wilson").

Bailey and Ryan strongly oppose Simpson's conspiracy notions. It should not be thought, though, that in doing so they engage in a one-sided defense of the British and Allied position. They are strongly critical of British blockade policy and of U.S. favoritism toward the Allies, and in fact conclude that the Germans had a good legal and moral case for sinking LUSITANIA.

Simpson's book was originally published by Longman in 1972. My edition is the 1983 Penguin paperback, whose pagination is different from that of the hardcover. Citations will therefore include both page and chapter numbers. Bailey and Ryan's book was published by the Free Press in 1975; as far as I know there has never been a second edition or a paperback.

Some other books should be noted as well. Hans mentioned the book by Dr. Robert D. Ballard, the famous underwater explorer, with Spencer Dunmore ["Exploring the Lusitania: Probing the Mysteries of the Sinking that Changed History"; Madison Press, 1995]. Ballard's work is a coffee-table book with excellent illustrations and a good narrative of the disaster, as well as descriptions of the wreck today. It is in agreement with Bailey and Ryan with two important exceptions, on the location of the torpedo strike and the cause of the mysterious second explosion that sank LUSITANIA.

Patrick Beesly's "Room 40: British Naval Intelligence 1914-18" [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982] includes an analysis of the LUSITANIA sinking. Beesly generally supports Simpson's charges, with some significant exceptions.

A good concise account of U.S. policy in this period is Arthur Link's "Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era 1910-1917" (New American Nation series), the second half of which is devoted mainly to the diplomacy of 1914-1917. Many Americans here will be familiar with the recently departed Professor Link, who for half a century was the leading authority on Woodrow Wilson. Link wrote a five-volume history of the Wilson Administration (which got only to 1917) and edited Wilson's papers, published in several dozen volumes. He was generally sympathetic to Wilson and his views on the neutrality period are more pro-Allied than those of Bailey, although not uncritically so.

Chronology (all dates 1915)

- **4 February**: Germany declares a war zone around the British Isles.
- **25 April**: Three U-boats, including U-20, are ordered to British waters.
- **30 April**: U-20 sails.
- **1 May**: Germany places a newspaper notice, warning American travelers.
- **1 May**: U.S. tanker GULFLIGHT attacked by U-boat.
- **1 May**: LUSITANIA sails from New York.
- **5 May**: U-20 sinks schooner EARL OF LATHOM off Old Head of Kinsale.
- **5 May**: Admiralty conference, at which Colin Simpson alleges the conspiracy was launched.
- **6 May, 0740**: U-20 sinks CANDIDATE off Coningbeg Light.
- **6 May, 1205**: Admiralty message to all British ships, telling them to maintain high speed and maintain a mid-channel course, avoiding headlands, and warning of submarines off Fastnet. (Acknowledged by LUSITANIA at 2005)
- **6 May, 1430**: U-20 sinks CENTURION off Coningbeg Light.
- **6 May, 1652**: Message from Queenstown: "Submarines active off south coast of Ireland."
- **7 May, 1102**: Queenstown, according to Colin Simpson, orders LUSITANIA into port.
- **7May, 1152**: LUSITANIA acknowledges message originally sent from Admiralty to Queenstown: "Submarines active in southern part Irish Channel. Last heard of twenty miles south of Coningbeg Lightship. Make certain LUSITANIA gets this."
- **7 May, 1410**: LUSITANIA struck by torpedo from U-20, and sinks in eighteen minutes. Of 1959 persons on board, 1195 are lost and 764 survive.

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THE BRITISH AND GERMAN BLOCKADES

The rules of blockade were largely embodied in a generally accepted customary law, rather than in clear written terms. The Paris Declaration of 1856 laid out only a few broad rules: privateering was abolished; neutral goods, except contraband (not defined), were not subject to capture; a neutral flag protected a belligerent's goods, except for contraband; and a blockade to be legal must be effective [Click here to read the text - part of WW1-WWW].

In 1908-1909 there was an international effort to codify the laws of maritime war in a more systematic fashion, resulting in the Declaration of London. The British House of Lords refused to ratify the accord and thus it did not come into legal force either for Britain or any other nation. There nonetheless was a sort of unofficial understanding that the Declaration would be treated as a statement of customary law. At the outset of the war Germany declared her intention to abide by it, and the United States tried without success to persuade Britain to make a similar pledge.

Almost immediately after the outbreak of war Britain took measures that violated the traditional laws of blockade, including the expansion of the definition of "contraband" to include all food and other traditionally exempt goods, the prolonged detention and search of neutral ships in British ports (as opposed to inspection at sea), and the announcement that the entire North Sea was a war zone and subject to mining.

The Royal Navy was also forced by the threat of the mine and torpedo to adopt a strategy of distant blockade rather than the traditional close blockade. Bailey at least regards this as a clear violation of the traditional law that blockade, to be legal, must be effective. The Paris Declaration of 1856 states only that "Blockades, in order to be binding, must be effective, that is to say, maintained by a force sufficient really to prevent access to the enemy." The British blockade was certainly effective--German commerce vanished from the seas--and it is not clear why a distant blockade would be inherently illegal. Article 1 of the Declaration of London states that "A blockade must not extend beyond the ports and coasts belonging to or occupied by the enemy," but this appears merely to state that neutral ports could not be directly blockaded, a prohibition stated more clearly in Article 18. Article 30 would seem to implicitly allow distant blockade, as it permits the blockading force to seize any "absolute contraband" (goods of a clearly military character) ultimately bound for the enemy, even if it is to be transhipped through a neutral port; a blockade confined to the immediate approaches to an enemy port clearly would not result in capture of such goods. The seizure of transhipped goods incorporated the concept of "continuous voyage," espoused by Britain. The British did in fact violate the unratified Declaration, and the traditional rules of blockade, by their expansion of the continuous-voyage principle to civilian goods, but this is a separate matter from the legality of distant blockade per se.

On 4 February 1915 Germany announced a blockade policy that, like Britain's, was in violation of the traditional rules of war. She declared a war zone around the British Isles and announced that all enemy merchant ships in that area, armed and unarmed, were subject to destruction "without its always being possible" to provide warning. International law clearly called for merchant ships to be warned, and their crews allowed to abandon ship, before they were sunk.

Bailey and Ryan are wrong in equally branding the British and German blockades as "unquestionably illegal 'paper blockades,'" and in simplistically referring to LUSITANIA as a "blockade runner." At this time the U-boat force was small, and only a small proportion of British merchant ships were being sunk. The British blockade was illegal in several respects, but in no way can its efficacy be compared to that of the German U-boat campaign at this stage of the war; British commerce continued to flow essentially unimpeded, albeit with some losses. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 94-95, 334]

U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE BELLIGERENTS

Criticism of U.S. policy during the neutrality period centers on our tolerance of British blockade methods and on the large-scale provision of war materiel and loans to the Allies.

Bailey and Ryan are critical of the U.S. failure to protest the illegalities of the British blockade as stridently as we did the German violations, remarking several times, for example, on the absence of any official U.S. protest over the mining of the North Sea. "The slow strangulation of Germany was achieved by an unorthodox long-range British blockade. Profit-hungry America, with a remarkable show of unneutrality, was acquiescing in it , while simultaneously shipping mountainous piles of munitions to the United Kingdom." [pp. 31, 38, 330]

By another interpretation, well expressed by Arthur Link, U.S. acquiescence in the British blockade, and continued trade with the Allies, was a proper policy. Trade by a neutral with a belligerent was not only permitted under international law but was in fact normal practice. To cut off British access to American goods and credits, in Link's view, would in itself be an unneutral action. Britain's command of the sea was a legitimate military advantage, and Britain was entitled to reap the benefits of it; navies exist not for show, but to protect one's own commerce and to choke off that of the enemy.

The Wilson Administration recognized the illegalities in British blockade practice. It did not oppose the Allied blockade as forcefully as it did German submarine operations, both because of its pro-Allied sympathies and because the British blockade, onerous as it was, did not cause direct destruction and death. There was nonetheless a great deal of friction between the United States and Britain on blockade policy almost to the moment the United States declared war on Germany. Tensions became especially severe in late 1916, after the resolution of the SUSSEX crisis. Wilson--angered by Britain's failure to cooperate in his peace efforts, by British blacklisting of U.S. firms, opening of U.S. mails, and other measures--was in Link's view moving rapidly toward a completely neutral position, as the President's private statements at the time suggest. Bailey and Ryan understate or ignore these disputes between the United States and the Allies, both before and after the LUSITANIA sinking. While their fundamental point of U.S. favoritism toward the Allies is undeniably true, Wilson's policy was much more nuanced than their work suggests.

Bailey and Ryan are critical of the U.S. trade in war materiel with Britain, while conceding that such trade between a neutral and a belligerent was not only legal but was normal international practice. They note that Congress did have the power to ban such trade with belligerents (as in fact it did in 1935, at a time when many saw this munitions trade as a major cause of U.S. involvement in the war). While a case can be made that Congress and the Wilson Administration should have restrained the arms trade to maintain U.S. neutrality, Bailey and Ryan take this to excess when they state that "Morally the Germans had a strong case when they urged the Washington government to clamp an embargo on such munitions in the interests of humanity, including a shortening of the blood-draining war." Neither Germany nor the Allies at this point was receptive to a compromise peace, and the only means by which either side proposed to shorten the war was by winning it. It is difficult, then, to see what moral standing Germany would have to call for the cessation of arms shipments to its enemies in the name of humanity; clearly Germany was not proposing to curtail its own arms production, and a domestically manufactured bullet or shell has much the same effect on human flesh as an imported one. To reiterate the point stressed by Link, British access to imports was the result of a naval superiority which was a perfectly legitimate military advantage, just as, say, German superiority in heavy artillery and staff organization was a legitimate advantage in the war on land. [Bailey and Ryan, p. 97]

The critics of U.S. policy, including Bailey and Ryan, have a much stronger case when we move from trade and blockade in the broadest sense to the operational nature of the U-boat war and the U.S. response to it. In the diplomatic wrangling over the German submarine campaign in 1915- 1916, the United States Government persistently failed to acknowledge the validity of the German point that it was not reasonable to expect a submarine to endanger herself by giving warning to a merchantman that was likely to be armed and under orders to ram any U-boat encountered (one exception to this was Secretary of State Lansing's abortive effort at a compromise arrangement in early 1916, which will be briefly discussed later). Furthermore, Wilson's rigid insistence that U.S. citizens were sacrosanct even when traveling on belligerent ships was not reasonable and had no foundation in international law. The President carried this point to an extreme in early 1916 when he quashed a Congressional effort to issue a mere warning--not a ban--advising Americans against traveling on armed belligerent merchantmen; in Wilson's view the presence of American citizens even on a defensively armed British merchantmen made an attack on such a ship an affront to the United States. Link's failure to criticize Wilson on these points is one sign of partiality in a generally excellent book.

COLIN SIMPSON ON U.S. POLICY AND GERMAN SHIPS

Colin Simpson condemns U.S. support of Britain and the Allies, in a much more intemperate and less knowledgeable fashion than Thomas Bailey. Simpson, as his fashion, casts his story largely in conspiratorial terms with a liberal dose of personal scorn. At one point Simpson descends to the absurd--when he states in connection with the Secretary of State's support for a perfectly legal bank loan to the Allies that if Lansing's "inclinations had favoured the Germans, he would undoubtedly have eventually been convicted of high treason." [p. 57, ch. 4 in the Penguin edition]

There are serious flaws of fact as well in Simpson's treatment of U.S. neutrality policy. He states that the German liners in the United States "were interned on the grounds that they were auxiliary cruisers of the German Navy and there has never been a satisfactory explanation why the American authorities did not give the same treatment to the LUSITANIA. German sources, have, perhaps uncharitably, claimed that it was because Morgan and Co., who owned a large part of the equity the German liners represented, did not wish to expose their investments to the attentions of the British Navy which constantly patrolled the mouth of the Hudson River." Simpson's characteristic insinuation of venality would have more force if there were any truth in the broader premise. The United States Government did not classify German merchantmen in U.S. ports as "auxiliary cruisers," and these German ships were never forcibly detained until the U.S. declaration of war in April 1917. The German owners kept their ships in American ports for the perfectly simple and logical reason that they would be captured by patrolling British warships if they ventured out. In a book whose main subject is the maritime war between Britain and Germany, and the U.S. involvement in it during our period of neutrality, this is a serious error, and indicative of both bias and lack of knowledge. [Simpson, p. 101, fn.]

LANSING'S ABORTIVE MODUS VIVENDI, JANUARY 1916

One diplomatic episode of early 1916, discussed by Simpson, deserves mention as it is pertinent to U.S. handling of the submarine campaign. This occurred after Wilson's three LUSITANIA notes to the Germans, and after Germany pledged, following the sinking of ARABIC, to refrain from sinking passenger ships without warning. While Colonel House was in Europe on a peace mission, Secretary of State Robert Lansing launched what Link describes as "one of the most maladroit blunders in American diplomatic history."

Lansing, with Wilson's approval, proposed a modus vivendi to end unrestricted submarine warfare. The Allies would pledge to disarm all their merchant ships, while Germany and Austria would agree not to sink merchantmen without warning. The British were dismayed, believing that such an agreement would leave their merchant fleet completely at the mercy of the Germans. The Central Powers were far more receptive. In a conversation with Austrian charge Baron Zwiedinek, Lansing gave the impression that the United States would welcome a German- Austrian declaration of unrestricted warfare against armed ships. The baron duly reported this, and in response on 10 February 1916 Germany announced that it would attack armed merchant ships without warning (although it had never exactly renounced such attacks; the ARABIC pledge applied only to unresisting liners). The Wilson Administration, though, almost immediately disowned the modus vivendi in the face of British resistance, and deplored the new submarine policy which the Germans and Austrians thought Lansing had approved. [This is a tangled story; for more details see Link, pp. 205-10, or especially Patrick Devlin, "Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson's Neutrality (Oxford, 1975), pp. 410-50.]

Simpson sees a dark plot in this fiasco. "Colonel House and Wilson had evolved a plan whereby America was to enter the war on the Allied side," although subsequently Simpson seems to suggest a more convoluted motivation which is not easy to follow--Wilson wanted to wreck the LUSITANIA negotiations to win the election, while simultaneously effecting a peace settlement in Europe and plotting American entry into the war. After Lansing proposed his modus vivendi, Wilson explained this master plan to him, and Lansing "devised a Machiavellian solution," deliberately enticing the Germans into declaring unrestricted submarine warfare against armed merchantmen, to embarrass them and destroy the negotiations over the LUSITANIA notes.

Lansing, Simpson says, "admitted the trick long after the war." This is one of many undocumented, or very vaguely documented, assertions in Simpson's work. If the source is Lansing's memoirs, Simpson is simply wrong, for Lansing does not admit a deliberate plot but only a mix-up involving an alleged misunderstanding of his words by Baron Zwiedinek, compounded by some machinations against Lansing on the part of Count Bernstorff, the German ambassador. Devlin believes that Lansing was covering up his own careless misstatement of the U.S. position by blaming the error on Zwiedinek's misinterpretation. In any event, there is absolutely no evidence for a deliberate set-up of the Germans by Lansing and Wilson. If Lansing's memoirs are the source of Simpson's assertion, he is grossly misusing the evidence to support his taste for conspiratorial theories. A more fundamental flaw is his implausible depiction of Woodrow Wilson as a devious practitioner of ruthless realpolitik, scheming in early 1916 to embroil the United States in war with Germany. Whatever the faults of Woodrow Wilson, there has never been a President who took this country to war with greater anguish and reluctance. [Simpson, p. 241, ch. 18; Devlin, p. 447; Lansing, "The War Memoirs of Robert Lansing," pp. 112-14]

Robert Lansing gets scant respect from many historians--a bumbler to some, a "weak man" to another (Robert H. Ferrell in "Woodrow Wilson & World War I"), a scheming, devious "chameleon" to Colin Simpson. To Bailey and Ryan (who barely mention this episode) he is a supine tool of the Allies, while Link on the other hand blames him for endangering relations with the Allies by proposing to disarm their merchant ships. Lansing no doubt deserves most of the blame for the modus vivendi fiasco. In retrospect, though, his basic idea--that merchant ships be disarmed in return for a German pledge to warn them before attacking--seems an honorable and fair-minded effort to stop the slide into unrestricted warfare at sea. In taking Lansing to task for the idea, Arthur Link again does not quite admit that there was justice in the German position that a U-boat could not be expected to expose itself to an armed merchantman--although in an indirect way he comes close to this in his statement in this context that Lansing's "sense of fairness sometimes outran his strategic thinking."

MERCHANT SHIPS: ARMING, RAMMING, AND WARNING

The traditional rules of war stipulated that a warship must warn a merchantman and allow its passengers and crew to abandon ship before sinking it, unless the merchant ship resisted or attempted to escape, or was in convoy under the protection of warships. A limited armament on a merchant ship, such as a gun or two for protection against pirates or lightly armed raiders, did not necessarily nullify the ship's immunity to attack without warning. A cargo of munitions or war materiel did not affect a merchant ship's status in this respect, although it certainly legitimized destruction of the ship and cargo after removal of passengers and crew. Traditional international law, however, did not anticipate the extensive arming of merchantmen that took place in 1914- 1918 or the advent of the submarine, a uniquely vulnerable craft, as a commerce raider.

Even before the war the British government publicly took steps toward the arming of merchantmen. On 17 March 1914 Winston Churchill told the Commons that forty merchant ships had each been armed with two 4.7-inch guns. He claimed that by the end of the fiscal year 1914- 1915, on 1 March 1915, seventy ships would be so armed. In Bailey and Ryan's account, "these formidable weapons would be mounted in the stern so that they could be fired only at a pursuer, and the vessels so armed were or would be ships engaged exclusively in carrying food to Britain. They would not be permitted to fight enemy surface warships and would be under instructions to surrender when overtaken by such foes." Presumably such an armament would be intended for use against lightly armed auxiliary cruisers, but it was bound to call the status of British merchantmen into question. Admiral Fisher, perceiving this, wrote to Prime Minister Asquith on 14 May 1914 that "the recent arming of our British merchant ships is unfortunate, for it gives the hostile submarine an excellent excuse (if she needs one) for sinking them." [Bailey and Ryan, pages 10-11]

After the outbreak of war the Admiralty issued orders to merchant ships dictating resistance to U- boats when possible. The orders of 10 February 1915 directed merchant ships to escape when possible, but "if a submarine comes up suddenly close ahead of you with obvious hostile intention, steer straight for her at your utmost speed..." Further instructions, issued ten days later, told armed steamers to open fire on a submarine even if it had not yet fired. Given the extreme vulnerability of a submarine, either to ramming or to even small-caliber shellfire, a U-boat that surfaced and gave warning against a merchantman so instructed was putting itself in serious peril. The Germans were well aware of these orders; although they were meant to be secret, copies were soon obtained from captured ships (and, Beesly indicates, from wireless intercepts as well). [Beesly, "Room 40," p. 94]

There were a number of instances of such resistance to U-boats before the sinking of LUSITANIA. The first recorded ramming of a U-boat by a merchant ship came on 28 February 1915, when the steamer THORDIS rammed and damaged a submarine off the south coast of England (Bailey and Ryan state that five U- boats were sunk by ramming before May 1915, but they are not clear on whether any of these sinkings were by merchant ships). Most merchant ships, however, did not yet have guns, and there are only two known cases of armed resistance to submarines before the sinking of LUSITANIA. [Bailey and Ryan, p. 53-54, p. 351n]

There is no clear indication that the United States Government was aware of the secret orders until December 1915, after the despatch of all three LUSITANIA notes. Bailey and Ryan imply that knowledge of such orders might have tempered the U.S. response to the sinking of LUSITANIA. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 48-49, 54]

Bailey and Ryan rightly put much emphasis on the secret Admiralty orders to merchantmen to fire upon or ram U-boats when possible; it is not reasonable to expect a submarine to surface and give warning under such circumstances. This, not the phantom munitions, the nonexistent armament, or any other conspiracy notion, is much the best argument for the German case in the sinking of LUSITANIA and in the tactics of their submarines in general.

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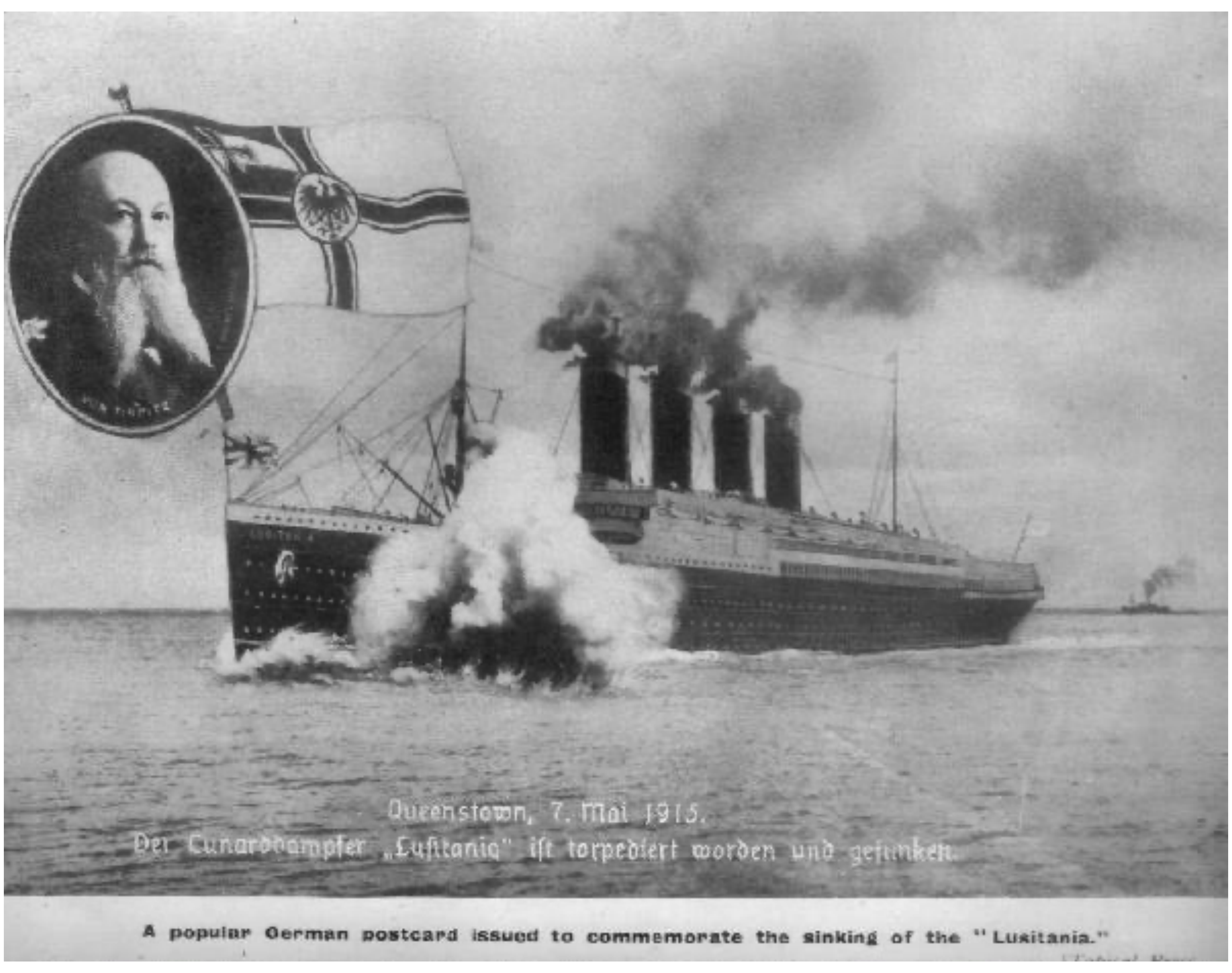
Queenstown, 7. Mai 1915.
Der Cunarddampfer „Luſitania" iſt torpediert worden und geſunken.

A popular German postcard issued to commemorate the sinking of the "Lusitania."

A German propaganda piece, courtesy of Cliff McMullen

Keith Allen (KEACLA1@aol.com) originally posted this multi-part article on WW1-L in March, 1999 - it appears here by permission of the author. It is well worth reading, and provides an excellent summary of the controversies surrounding the loss of the *Lusitania* and the book by Colin Simpson.

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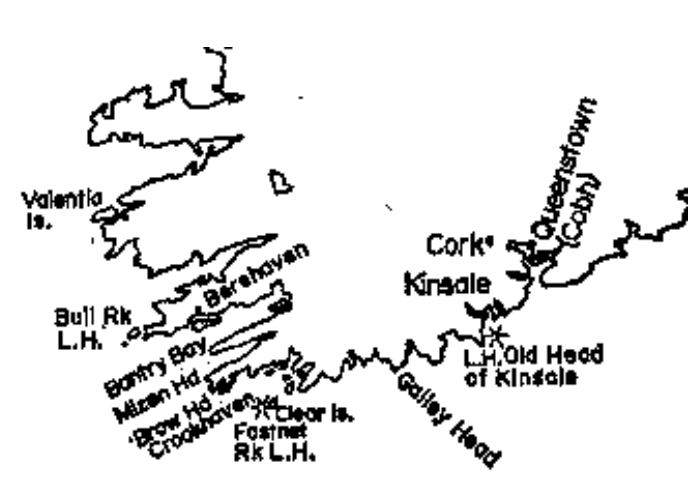
IV. Warning and Conspiracy

Previous Section

The first clear indication of increased peril to LUSITANIA was the extraordinary notice placed in American newspapers by the German Embassy on 1 May 1915, the day the Cunarder sailed: "Travellers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk."

In retrospect it seems clear that this warning, and the known presence of U- boats in LUSITANIA's path, should have induced a far greater sense of alarm in the British--in the Admiralty, the Cunard Line, and in Captain Turner on the bridge of LUSITANIA. Several authors, most notably Colin Simpson, go beyond this to claim that the Admiralty, and in particular First Lord Winston Churchill, conspired to put LUSITANIA in danger in hopes of sparking an incident that might lead to American entry into the war. While this allegation directly occupies only a few pages of Simpson's book, it is this charge which won him such great attention. Patrick Beesly, a well known historian of British naval intelligence, supports most of Simpson's charges in his "Room 40."

As we approach the actual sinking of LUSITANIA, a map might be helpful in visualizing the movements of the liner and her attacker:



Based on the map in Simpson's *Lusitania*

What we have is the southern coast of Ireland, running roughly WSW-ENE. Fastnet is a rock off the southwestern tip of Ireland, a well-known navigational landmark. Roughly forty nautical miles east-northeast of Fastnet is the Old Head of Kinsale; LUSITANIA went down about twelve miles off this promontory. A few miles east- northeast of Kinsale is Queenstown (now Cobh), the main British naval base in the area. Roughly fifty miles east-northeast of Queenstown is Coningbeg Lightship. A few miles beyond that is the entrance to St. George's Channel and the Irish Sea, leading to Liverpool, LUSITANIA's destination.

U-20 AND KAPITANLEUTNANT SCHWIEGER

On 25 April 1915 Fregattenkapitan (Commander) Herman Bauer of the 3rd Submarine Flotilla ordered three of his boats to British waters: U-30 to the Dartmouth area, U-20 and U-27 to the Irish Sea and Bristol Channel. Simpson ties this order directly to the impending sailing of LUSITANIA. Referring to British preparations for the voyage, Simpson writes that "Somehow the German Admiralty learned of these moves, and early on the morning of 24 April Fregattenkapitan Bauer...was summoned to the flagship in Wilhelmshaven." He provides no documentation to relate this conference or the German deployment to the impending voyage of LUSITANIA.

Simpson states that Bauer's deployment order to U-30 (the other two boats were still in port and received written or verbal orders) was "almost certainly" intercepted and deciphered by the Admiralty, which might well be true. He says, with ominous implication, that no copy was sent to Queenstown (now Cobh), the main Royal Navy base along LUSITANIA's track on the southern coast of Ireland. "Certainly both Naval Intelligence and the Admiralty War Staff knew not only of the U-boats' presence, but also of their mission, for Bauer's message to the U-30 had been explicit. However, it had not occurred to anybody to send a warning to the LUSITANIA."

The deployment order to U-30 is quoted in full in Bauer's diary and Simpson's book: "Await large English troop transports coming out from west and south coasts of England. Head via the most rapid route around Scotland for the English Channel. Take position in front of Dartmouth. Attack transports merchant vessels warships. Keep position occupied for as long as supplies allow. U-20 and U-27 to Irish Sea and Bristol Channel. Ends." This, to Colin Simpson, constitutes an explicit warning that LUSITANIA was to be targeted, or so he implies. In fact, as Bailey and Ryan state, there is no evidence at all that the Germans made a premeditated effort to sink the liner. Furthermore, LUSITANIA received abundant warning of the presence of submarines in the area, a matter to be discussed later. [Simpson, pp. 93-94, ch. 7, and page 119, ch. 9; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 117-18]

U-30 was the first of the three submarines to reach her station, and made her first sinking on 28 April. On 1 May, the day LUSITANIA sailed, U-30 was involved in an incident that in a small way foreshadowed the diplomatic uproar over the sinking of the Cunarder. She torpedoed the American tanker GULFLIGHT, killing three of her crew; the ship was heavily damaged but survived. As a ship under armed escort GULFLIGHT was legally subject to unwarned attack, and the submarine commander stated that he did not see the tanker's neutral markings. The second submarine, U-27, was forced to return home with jammed bow planes. After U-30 turned for home on 4 May, U-20 was the only boat of the three on station.

U-20 was commanded by Kapitanleutnant Walther Schwieger, a successful and popular commander. She sailed from Emden on 30 April. She would round Scotland and Ireland to the north and then pass down the west coast of Ireland before turning east toward the Irish Channel. On 3 May, while west of the Orkneys, Schwieger spotted a small steamer with a Danish flag but no neutral markings. Assuming that she was British, Schwieger attempted to attack but the torpedo tube malfunctioned. On 4 May Schwieger tried to attack a ship that he himself described as Swedish, HIBERNIA, but was not able to get into position. On 5 May U-20 rounded the southwestern tip of Ireland. Near the Old Head of Kinsale she sighted a small schooner, EARL OF LATHOM. Schwieger allowed the crew to abandon ship before sinking the vessel.

On the late afternoon of 5 May U-20 sighted a ship that Schwieger described as "Norwegian with neutral signs," but decided that the neutral signs were in an unusual position; Simpson says only that Schwieger "attacked another steamer." U-20's torpedo missed. [Simpson, p. 133, ch. 10; Bailey and Ryan, p. 124]

Schwieger had consistently attacked ships with neutral markings with no hesitation. It is true that early in the war British ships had used neutral flags for cover, but under the protest of neutrals this practice seems to have ended by this point. There was a great deal of genuine neutral shipping, particularly Norwegian and Dutch, in the waters of northern Europe, but Schwieger seems to have been utterly indifferent to the identity or character of the ships he attacked. This trait was not universal among U-boat skippers; there were U-boat commanders who conducted their operations with as much humanity as possible under the circumstances, but Schwieger was not among them. Simpson states that "Schwieger was a more cautious seaman than von Rosenberg [captain of U-30], and was not so inclined to give any potential target the benefit of the doubt. His personal record would indicate that he was both more ruthless and more easily frightened." In February 1915 he had knowingly attacked the British hospital ship ASTURIAS, claiming that since it was sailing out of England it could not have been carrying wounded. Even Simpson describes this as "flimsy logic at best," the closest he comes in his entire book to criticism of a German action on moral grounds. A deliberate attack on a hospital ship is an extraordinary action for any nation in any conflict; this is one taboo that has not been eroded in the twentieth-century trend toward unrestricted warfare at sea. Even in the Second World War such incidents were extremely rare, although they did occur (e.g. the Luftwaffe attacked several British hospital ships off Sicily and Salerno and sank two of them; a kamikaze crashed USS COMFORT during the Okinawa campaign) [Simpson, p. 138, ch. 11; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 115, 252]

Bailey and Ryan summarize Schwieger in this way: "As a man who habitually carried out his orders to the letter, he was not a conspicuously humane officer. Yet he was far from being the most ruthless of the German submarine commanders and evidently was never accused of such atrocities as deliberately drowning, bombing, or machine-gunning survivors who were scrambling into small boats." It should be added that, contrary to what Bailey and Ryan's passage might unintentionally imply, there are few known cases of such atrocities by U-boats (it is also worth noting that, while Simpson suggests at one point that there was an Admiralty policy of slaughtering helpless U-boat sailors, there is no evidence for this either, although there is at least one known incident--[note 1].) [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 114-15; Simpson p. 40, ch. 2, and pp. 137- 38, ch. 11]

Schwieger sank two more ships before meeting LUSITANIA. On the morning of 6 May he met the Harrison Line steamer CANDIDATE thirteen miles southeast of Coningbeg Light. He opened up with guns, then allowed the crew to escape after the ship hove to. In the afternoon U-20 spotted CENTURION, another Harrison Line ship, about seventeen miles south of the lightship; Schwieger torpedoed her without warning. After this encounter Schwieger decided to remain in the area, rather than pushing on to Liverpool in accordance with his orders. The fog would hinder his visibility, leaving him vulnerable to British ships patrolling St. George's Channel and the Liverpool approaches; he would probably be forced to transit submerged. He believed also that if he went into the Irish Sea he would have insufficient fuel to return to Germany. Finally, U-20 had only three torpedoes remaining, and standing orders dictated that two be kept in reserve for the return transit. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 123-27]

EARLY BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND DISPOSITIONS

By 1 May, the day LUSITANIA sailed, the Admiralty was aware that a group of U-boats was en route to British waters. Bauer's deployment order to U-30, sent about 25 April, had been decoded by Room 40. On 30 April, U-20 tested her radio on departure from base, and this too was intercepted. Simpson states that on 1 May Room 40, the Admiralty's intelligence center, informed the Admiralty War Staff and coastal stations that three submarines were en route to the Irish Sea; by 4 May he specifically indicates that Queenstown had been notified of the danger. Beesly claims that only the Grand Fleet was given this information, and that the major coastal stations along LUSITANIA's track--Queenstown, Liverpool, and Milford Haven on the Welsh side of the St. George's Channel--were not told. [Simpson, p. 94n, ch. 7; pages 115, 119, chapter 9; Beesly, pp. 97-99]

British forces were not well positioned to counter the threat. Rear Admiral Sir Charles Coke, the commander at Queenstown, had a motley assemblage of small craft, armed trawlers and the like, with which to patrol a considerable expanse of sea. He had no destroyers. The only substantial warship at Queenstown there was the old cruiser JUNO, flying the flag of Rear Admiral Sir Horace Hood of Cruiser Force E, a collection of old cruisers and patrol craft [note 2]. Simpson contends that JUNO was initially detailed to escort LUSITANIA, and that Turner was so briefed in New York just before departing. This matter is discussed in more detail below. [Simpson, p. 113, ch. 9]

THE ADMIRALTY CONFERENCE OF 5 MAY

On 5 May occurred the Admiralty conference which Colin Simpson sees as the key to a conspiracy to encourage an incident that would enrage America and bring her into the war on the side of the Allies.In attendance were, according to Simpson: Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty; Admiral Jack Fisher, First Sea Lord; Vice Admiral Henry Oliver, Chief of the War Staff; Captain Reginald "Blinker" Hall, Director of Naval Intelligence; and Commander (actually Lieutenant Commander) Joseph Kenworthy, a subordinate of Hall's. [main source for this section is Simpson, pp. 125-29 in the Penguin edition, chapter 10]

In Simpson's account, Oliver first briefed his superiors on the status of enemy and Allied forces. After mentioning JUNO, then at sea, he "drew to Churchill's attention the fact that the JUNO was unsuitable for exposure to submarine attack without escort, and suggested that elements of the destroyer flotilla from Milford Haven should be sent forthwith to her assistance. At this juncture the Admiralty War Diary stops short, perhaps understandably as it was here that the decision was taken that was to be the direct cause of the disaster. No one alive today knows who took it, but Churchill and Fisher must share the responsibility. Shortly after noon on 5 May the Admiralty signalled the JUNO to abandon her escort mission and return to Queenstown....The LUSITANIA was not informed that she was now alone, and closing every minute to the U-20. Admiral Coke at Queenstown was informed of the order and instructed to protect the LUSITANIA as best he could. Coke in his turn did not warn the LUSITANIA."

Captain Hall, Simpson states, "queried the decision, but with whom it is impossible to state positively. It was an incredible decision by any standards and can only be explained on two grounds. Firstly, that both Churchill and Fisher were so preoccupied with the Dardanelles and their personal problems that they failed to appreciate it; or secondly, that it was the pinnacle of Churchill's higher strategy of embroiling the U-boats with a neutral power."

The only hint of positive evidence of such a conspiracy comes from Simpson's invocation of the account of Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy, who allegedly left the room disgusted by the proceedings and in 1927 suggested in his book, "Freedom of the Seas," that LUSITANIA was deliberately exposed to German submarines. "Kenworthy's is the only eyewitness account of that morning in the map room..." Simpson's story of Kenworthy raises extremely serious questions, and is discussed in more detail in the next section..

This vaguely sourced account is the core of Simpson's case that LUSITANIA was deliberately exposed. Apart from the hints allegedly provided by Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy, Simpson bases his case entirely on inference and especially on the withdrawal of JUNO from her alleged escort mission.As Bailey and Ryan point out, Simpson gives no documentation for his assertion that JUNO was meant to escort LUSITANIA, and no evidence for this claim has ever surfaced. Turner at the coroner's inquest immediately after the sinking specifically stated that he knew nothing of any plans for an escort. JUNO was singularly ill-suited for the role--a cruiser commissioned in 1897, with a top speed when new of 19.5 knots, below even LUSITANIA's reduced top speed. Even Patrick Beesly, who is fundamentally in accord with Simpson's conspiracy theme, concedes that JUNO makes no sense as an escort and that Hood's Force E, of which JUNO was flagship, "were in no sense anti-submarine ships, indeed they were tempting targets for any U-boat. Their mission was to act against any armed merchant raider or bold blockade breaker which might appear, and to pass on directions to inward-bound British merchant ships." Beesly further states that JUNO's return to port on 5 May was a normal rotation of patrol ships and that her relief, the boarding vessel PARTRIDGE, was just as ill-suited as the cruiser to the mission of antisubmarine escort. [Simpson, p. 113, ch. 9 and passim; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 174, 196; Beesly, pp. 96, 104, 110; Beesly is conspicuously silent about the conference of 5 May]

Simpson's own account of this 5 May conference at one crucial point contradicts his entire thesis. This passage bears repeating. After telling us that LUSITANIA was not informed of the withdrawal of JUNO, Simpson says that: "Admiral Coke at Queenstown was informed of the order and instructed to protect the LUSITANIA as best he could. Coke in his turn did not warn LUSITANIA." To ask the glaringly obvious question--if Churchill and Fisher wanted LUSITANIA to be sunk, why did they tell Coke to protect her? What is the significance of the failure of the Admiralty to contact LUSITANIA directly, if Coke was perfectly free to do so and, by inference, would have been expected to do so? If Coke himself was either a lethargic fool or a tool of this conspiracy, why does Simpson subsequently have him frantically trying to bring LUSITANIA into Queenstown to protect her from submarine attack?

THE STRANGE CASE OF LIEUTENANT COMMANDER KENWORTHY

Simpson's account of the Admiralty conference of 5 May is the heart of his conspiracy theory; his description of Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy's reactions is his only trace of positive evidence for such a theory. Simpson states that Kenworthy was "then working in the political section of Naval Intelligence," and gives this account of his response to the events of the conference: "Commander Kenworthy, who was not called on to speak in such august company, was wondering why he had been summoned in the first place. His only previous contact with Churchill had been when he had submitted a paper at Churchill's request on the political results of an ocean liner being sunk with American passengers on board. He did not know if Churchill had even read it, but had naturally supposed that in the turmoil caused by the torpedoing of the GULFLIGHT this was why he was required for the conference. What was said will never be known, but Kenworthy left that meeting in the map room disgusted by the cynicism of his superiors. In 1927 he gave a hint of what did transpire in his book 'The Freedom of the Seas.' 'The LUSITANIA', he wrote, ' was sent at considerably reduced speed into an area where a U-boat w as known to be waiting and with her escorts withdrawn.' [Simpson here inserts a footnote, citing p. 211 of the book as his source and stating that "The original manuscript stated 'was *deliberately* sent'. The word 'deliberately' was deleted after representations from the Admiralty to Messrs Hutchinson, the publishers."] Their Lordships, he concluded, had obviously decided to let the international legality and success of the German U-boat offensive be tested in the court of public opinion. Kenworthy's is the only eyewitness account of that morning in the map room, and if responsibility is to be apportioned, then at this stage it must be the reader's decision." [Simpson, pp. 128-29 of the Penguin edition, ch. 10]

Lieutenant Commander Joseph M. Kenworthy was not a conventional naval officer. After the war he left the Royal Navy and became first a Liberal and then a Labour MP, until losing his seat in the general election of 1931. He strongly questioned the traditional British form of naval war and even described himself as a pacifist, although it is clear from the context and other statements that he was using the term in a rather loose sense ("The authors are pacifists, but no more so than most of their countrymen and many professional sailors and soldiers"). At some point between the wars he assumed the title of Lord Strabolgi (in which name his books are sometimes listed). Whatever his pacifist inclinations after the First World War, he like many others changed his mind by 1939, and during the Second World War wrote several books strongly supportive of the Royal Navy and the war effort (e.g. "Narvik and After: A Study of the Scandinavian Campaign," and "From Gibraltar to Suez: The Battle of the Middle Sea," published in 1940 and 1941 respectively).

In his earlier, more radical days, however, Kenworthy did indeed suggest that LUSITANIA had been deliberately exposed. In 1928 Kenworthy and George Young wrote "Freedom of the Seas," a broad philosophical tract in which the authors urged an end to Britain's traditional strategies of blockade and pleaded for Anglo-American concord on the free and peaceful use of the seas; page 211, cited by Simpson, is a part of this plea for trans-Atlantic amity and has no remote bearing on the LUSITANIA incident. The sentence quoted by Simpson, the one allegedly altered at the behest of the Admiralty, does not appear anywhere in the book; it is conceivable that it was included in some printings, although after examining three copies of the book, in both the British and American editions, this seems highly unlikely. There is, however, a passage that comes close. Kenworthy and Young (page 72) justify the German submarine campaign as a retaliation against the British food blockade, yet state that it was a foolish move because it antagonized neutrals, especially America. "The British did not retaliate in kind and no neutral ship was ever sunk by a British mine or submarine. There was no need for it and they knew a trick worth two of that. They let a test case go before the Court of public opinion. The LUSITANIA steaming at half-speed straight through a submarine cruising ground was incontinently sunk." Leaving aside Kenworthy and Young's errors of fact or logic (LUSITANIA was steaming at much more than half speed, and her speed in any case was solely at her captain's discretion), the crucial point is that this passage comes in the context of a broad political discussion of the war, with no hint of personal recollection or inside knowledge. While Kenworthy clearly does not like Winston Churchill, regarding him as a reactionary militarist, nowhere in his book does he mention any personal contact with him during the war.

A careful reading of Simpson's passage on Kenworthy will indicate that he does not unambiguously attribute his "eyewitness account" of the 5 May conference to the book "Freedom of the Seas." His passages on Kenworthy's impressions, as well as his ostensible knowledge of correspondence between the publisher and the Admiralty, are suggestive of access to Kenworthy's private papers and probably to his family--although it does seem odd that Kenworthy would leave a written or verbal account detailing his inner sentiments on the conference while leaving unsaid the actual details of that meeting, for as Simpson states, "What was said will never be known." Furthermore, it would seem that an author with access of this sort would at some point become aware that Kenworthy had published an autobiography, very much different from his "Freedom of the Seas."

In 1933, two years after leaving Parliament, Kenworthy published "Sailors, Statesmen--and Others: An Autobiography." This book gives an account of Kenworthy's wartime career that is seriously at variance with that of Colin Simpson, who describes Kenworthy as an officer "in the political section of Naval Intelligence." Kenworthy spent a year ashore in c. 1906-1907 doing courses at Greenwich and Portsmouth. This year "was the only period of my time in the Navy not spent afloat, until I joined the Admiralty War Staff as one of the original Plans Division in 1916, with the exception of a short war course in 1913.". In about late 1912 or early 1913 he was given command of destroyer BULLFINCH. He reiterates his earlier contention: "I also applied, and was accepted, to qualify in the newly introduced War Staff course [the aforementioned 1913 course], and this was my only spell of shore service after leaving Greenwich as an acting sub-lieutenant until my appointment on the Admiralty War Staff in August 1916." [Kenworthy, "Sailors, Statesmen--and Others," pp. 34-35, 47]

"I was still in command of this destroyer and at sea off our east coast when war was declared in August 1914." Kenworthy describes a collision with a Dutch ship in which four men were killed; he was absolved of blame but after the war his political enemies attempted to use the incident against him. "I finished the first five months of the war on much the same kind of patrol work and then, with the same BULLFINCH, joined the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow. There we carried out the normal work of a destroyer attached to the Battle Fleet," and he then describes an encounter with a U-boat. His time in BULLFINCH came to an end; Kenworthy quotes a farewell plaque presented by the crew, dated October 1915. He then did a short spell as second lieutenant and turret officer in a battleship before joining the Admiralty War Staff in August 1916. [Kenworthy, pp. 47-53]

Kenworthy, by the time of this writing, was a politician of somewhat leftist views who had already expressed in print his suspicions that LUSITANIA had been the victim of an Admiralty conspiracy. To believe Colin Simpson's account of Kenworthy's role in the conference of 5 May 1915, one must believe that such a man would cooperate in a cover-up of this conspiracy not merely by omitting mention of it, but by completely falsifying the first two years of his war record- -this although there were unquestionably several hundred men still alive in 1933 who had served with Kenworthy or were in a position to know whether he had served in the destroyer flotillas of the Grand Fleet in 1914-1915.

This extremely serious discrepancy between Kenworthy's autobiography and Colin Simpson's book has not, to the best of my knowledge, been previously reported. When I found this I determined that before mentioning it elsewhere I owed Mr. Simpson a chance to respond to the questions inevitably raised. I had two brief phone conversations with his agents and then faxed to them, for relay to Mr. Simpson, a letter in which I laid out the essence of the story above and asked him to give his sources for the Kenworthy matter and for the contention that JUNO was initially assigned to escort LUSITANIA. I made clear in this letter that I intended to discuss this matter in a semi-public electronic forum on the weekend of 20-21 March 1999 (which proved over- optimisitic). Mr. Simpson did not respond.

After giving Mr. Simpson's story every reasonable benefit of the doubt and affording him the opportunity to address it, I am left with the following logic. The veracity of Colin Simpson's version of Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy's story, the only positive evidence he presents for the conspiracy, rests on these assumptions:

- 1) An obscure destroyer captain, with no staff experience other than a short course, was plucked from the fleet, asked to render his opinions to the First Lord on the extremely sensitive question of U.S. reaction to the sinking of a ship with American passengers, and invited to sit in on a conference at which the leadership of the Royal Navy plotted the destruction of one of Britain's greatest liners.
- 2) This officer left a personal note or verbal reminiscences detailing his innermost sentiments on the meeting, but without divulging the actual details of it.
- 3) An author with access to these private papers, probably entailing contact with Kenworthy's family, nonetheless remained unaware of the existence of his autobiography--for if Colin Simpson had read "Sailors, Statesmen--and Others," he surely would have seen the need to account for the immense conflict between that work and his.
- 4) Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy, after insinuating in print that LUSITANIA was the victim of a conspiracy, five years later cooperated in the cover-up of the conspiracy not merely by neglecting to mention it in his autobiography, but by massively falsifying his wartime career.

Each of these circumstances, with the possible exception of the second, is extremely unlikely. The cumulative probabilty of this chain of events is infinitesimally small.

In a matter of lesser importance, one might choose to overlook a misrepresentation of this kind or to treat it with tasteful euphemisms. In this case, where such evidence is presented in support of a false allegation of treachery and mass murder, no such indulgence is possible: Colin Simpson's account of the Admiralty conference of 5 May 1915--and in particular, of Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy's presence at this meeting and impressions thereof--is almost certainly a fabrication.

The two most important questions involved in the failure to protect LUSITANIA are the absence of escorts and the adequacy of the warnings given to the liner; these will now be examined in somewhat more detail.

THE QUESTION OF ESCORTS

Patrick Beesly, while rejecting Simpson's JUNO tale, is highly suspicious of the failure of the Admiralty to assign escorts to LUSITANIA. Four destroyers--LEGION, LUCIFER, LINNET, and LAVEROCK--were at Milford Haven off the entrance to the Bristol Channel, about a hundred miles from Queenstown. Beesly sees the failure to employ them as evidence of a conspiracy to leave LUSITANIA to her fate.

Beesly and Simpson both ignore an important point stressed by Bailey and Ryan. By coming under armed escort LUSITANIA would lose her protected status as a merchantman under international law, and a submarine would be under no legal obligation to warn her before attacking. This was by no means a moot point or an anachronism. The Germans had not yet sunk a large liner, and there is good reason to believe that there were many U-boat captains who would have shown far more hesitancy than Schwieger in attacking what was obviously a large passenger steamer. That being said, the British certainly could have assigned more ships to patrol along LUSITANIA's track without directly escorting the liner. [Bailey and Ryan, p. 41]

Beesly tells us that the four destroyers (as well as two Q-ships, a peculiar choice of for an escort or regular patrol in any case) "remained inexplicably inactive." In these same pages he notes that on 5 May these four destroyers had completed eight consecutive nights of operations, escorting the movement of the Irish Division from Dublin to Liverpool for eventual shipment to the Dardanelles. The destroyers put in to Milford Haven on the afternoon of 6 May. They were scheduled to rendezvous with the dreadnought COLOSSUS (where is not stated) at midday on 8 May and escort her to Devonport. Beesly apparently has no conception of the strain on men and materiel of eight successive nights at sea on a 1000-ton destroyer, with barely enough time for fueling and maintenance before putting out again to escort the battleship; this is not a rate of operations that justifies the phrase "inexplicable inactivity." In retrospect the Admiralty should have recognized the grave threat to LUSITANIA and postponed the movement of COLOSSUS, but this misjudgement falls rather short of the standard of evidence required to accuse the leadership of the Royal Navy of the deliberate mass murder of their countrymen.

In fact the destroyer forces of the Royal Navy were severely overextended, and Beesly himself provides much indication of this. Troop convoys always have the highest priority and the strongest escorts of any shipping, yet in the spring of 1915 even they were being cancelled for lack of destroyers. Beesly says that on 29 March the Admiralty told the Canadian authorities that after 7 May no convoys of Canadian troops could be accepted "due to the difficulty of providing ocean escorts, a very thin excuse." Beesly does not attempt to tell us why this was a feeble excuse. More puzzling still, he does not tell us why the Admiralty would desire an excuse to refuse the Canadian troops, the British Government presumably not being averse to a major reinforcement of the BEF. This seems in fact a rather transparent effort by Beesly to dodge the implications of his own evidence that the British were in reality desperately short of destroyers. There are further indications of this shortage: Beesly states that on 23 April all troop movements to and from the British Isles were stopped, with the exception of the aforementioned transfer of the Irish Division; Bailey and Ryan note that two weeks after the sinking of LUSITANIA the Royal Navy was forced to send destroyers on a 600-mile passage from Harwich to Liverpool to provide an escort for her sister MAURETANIA, which was taking troops to the Mediterranean.

In retrospect it is clear that there should have been greater alarm on the part of all concerned on the British side--LUSITANIA should have been rerouted or ordered into Queenstown; more ships should have been put on patrol. Such acts of omission can be discerned in the wake of most disasters. To find in such apparent laxity a deliberate, murderous conspiracy is, in the absence of serious evidence, grossly irresponsible. Beesly provides no evidence for such perfidy and in fact provides a great deal of evidence against his own thesis. [Sources for this section: Beesly, pp. 101-8; Bailey and Ryan, p. 183]

WARNINGS TO LUSITANIA

We have already noted that by Simpson's own account of the 5 May conference, Admiral Coke was instructed to protect LUSITANIA. The liner further received a series of warnings in the two days before her sinking, a circumstance hard to reconcile with a deliberate Admiralty effort to ensure her destruction.

The sinking of the schooner EARL OF LATHOM on 5 May indicated that at least one U-boat was active off the south coast of Ireland. At 1205 on 6 May the Admiralty addressed a message to all British ships, reading: "Between South Foreland and Folkestone keep within two miles of shore and pass between the two light vessels. Take Liverpool pilot at bar. Avoid headlands; pass harbours at full speed; steer mid-channel course. Submarines off Fastnet" (this message also has a bearing on the dispute over Captain Turner's responsibility for the disaster, discussed in a later section). LUSITANIA received this message at 2005. It was repeated six times the following day. At 1952 on 6 May Queenstown, apparently on its own initiative, sent a plain- language message reading "Submarines active off south coast of Ireland," which LUSITANIA received and acknowledged. In the meantime U-20 sank two ships off Coningbeg Light on 6 May, as previously related: CANDIDATE at 0740 and CENTURION at 1430. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 133-35]

On LUSITANIA's final day there were several efforts to warn her; in some cases the details are murky. Alfred Booth, chairman of Cunard, was--belatedly perhaps--becoming gravely concerned about the peril to his prize liner. Sometime on the morning of 7 May he visited Rear Admiral Stileman, the Senior Naval Officer Liverpool. Bailey and Ryan state that he asked that a wireless be sent to LUSITANIA informing her of the sinking of the two ships off Coningbeg Light. Simpson says that Booth "demanded that steps be taken to warn the LUSITANIA. Booth was always reticent as to what Stileman agreed to do, but he came away from that office convinced that the LUSITANIA was to be diverted into Queenstown. He telephoned his cousin George and told him so, and George Booth sent a telegram to Paul Crompton aboard the LUSITANIA to await him at the Cunard office at Queenstown. [Simpson here inserts a footnote stating Booth's autobiography, p. 149, as his source]. The telegram told him to disembark there and come directly to London via Fishguard on the Irish packet. Alfred Booth, until the time he died, would only concede that Stileman had agreed to take certain steps, but that the tragedy occurred before they could be put into execution." I have not checked Booth's autobiography, but it seems inconsistent to cite this work as the source for the contention that Booth believed his ship was to be diverted to Queenstown, then two sentences later to say that Booth would never explicitly state just what Stileman had agreed to do. [Bailey and Ryan, p. 136; Simpson, p. 145, ch. 11]

Simpson then goes on to state that about 1100 Rear Admiral Coke spoke with the Admiralty and with Stileman. "There is no record of what was said, but Coke has stated that he asked for permission to divert the LUSITANIA and could not get a firm decision. He was told to make sure that the LUSITANIA got the Admiralty message addressed to all British merchant ships which warned of a submarine having been seen twenty miles south of Coningbeg." Simpson does not give a source for this contention. Again, not for the first or last time, he mentions in passing an effort to warn LUSITANIA without addressing its inconsistency with his conspiracy theme. Simpson then alleges that Coke made an effort to bring LUSITANIA into Queenstown for her protection, a peculiar story discussed separately in the next section. [p. 145, ch. 11]

Beesly, too, has a story of attempted diversion. Claiming that several messages between LUSITANIA and the Admiralty are missing from the records, he contends that "there is some reason to suppose that they included a request from Turner to divert to the North Channel [around the north of Ireland] rather than use St. George's Channel, and that this request was refused." Beesly provides no documentation or supporting argument for this theory. [Beesly, p. 105]

One final and important warning message reached LUSITANIA on the fatal day, sent by the

Admiralty via Queenstown and the wireless station at Valencia, Ireland, and acknowledged by the Cunarder at 1152: "Submarines active in southern part Irish Channel. Last heard of twenty miles south of Coningbeg Lightship. MAKE CERTAIN LUSITANIA GETS THIS" [emphasis added]. Simpson does not dispute the existence of this message and in fact quotes it in full, including the closing admonition. But in an effort to avoid the obvious inconsistency of this warning with his conspiracy theory, he contends that "that position was by now twenty-eight hours old," and did not convey four further sightings since dawn of 7 May. Simpson gives no documentation for these later sightings. He provides no evidence that anyone on the British side knew that U-20 had moved southwest from Coningbeg Light toward the Old Head of Faslane. He provides no evidence that the position given in this message of 1152, closely corresponding to that in which CANDIDATE and CENTURION were sunk on 6 May, was not the last known position of the German submarine.

Beesly, too, cannot succesfully reconcile this succession of warning messages with his belief that the Admiralty plotted the destruction of LUSITANIA. He makes the utterly inexplicable statement that Captain Turner "was not specifically warned of U-boat danger," followed by the frankly lame argument that the warning messages were not addressed specifically to LUSITANIA--as if that makes any difference when these messages were addressed to all British ships and LUSITANIA is known to have received and acknowledged them. He does not mention the closing admonition in the message received by LUSITANIA at 1152 on 7 May. [Beesly, p. 116]

THE QUEENSTOWN-DIVERSION STORY

Simpson then goes to an aspect of his story that does not make sense even on its own terms, let alone in relation to any external evidence. Coke sent a message of some sort at 1102. At first Simpson seems to state that this was a directive to his own patrol forces. In an effort to reposition his forces to bolster his submarine patrols, Coke's message directed the tug HELLESPONT to return to Queenstown, because her escort, the yacht SCADAUN, was to search for U-boats. Because of a callsign mix-up, LUSITANIA believed the message was for her, telling her to enter Queenstown. Captain Turner "to the end of his life...was adamant that it instructed him to divert into Queenstown. In the event the LUSITANIA was probably diverted by accident. Possibly it was design and was Coke's way of trying to ensure her safety; for his message to the tug HELLESPONT was certainly sent to the LUSITANIA." In response to this message, Turner at 1215 (note the time) "swung the LUSITANIA to port so violently that several passengers lost their balance and chaos was created in the galleys below. The LUSITANIA headed for the shore."

After at first stating that this message of 1102 was probably not actually intended for LUSITANIA, Simpson from this point until the end of his book treats it as an established fact that Coke ordered LUSITANIA into Queenstown and that the Admiralty engaged in a monstrous cover-up of the order. He indeed sees this message as the key to Mersey hearings; when Mersey suddenly realized that this message had been hidden, he belatedly recognized the Admiralty plot to frame Captain Turner. After the sinking, Admiral Oliver had omitted "this vital signal" from a list of messages in the material prepared for the inquiry. The Board of Trade had drafted a question, "What wireless messages if any were received by or transmitted from the LUSITANIA on or during the voyage in question?" Simpson says that "the Admiralty committee, realizing that this would expose Coke's critical signal, amended this to: 'Were any messages sent or received by the LUSITANIA with reference to enemy submarines during the voyage?'".

It is impossible to understand Simpson's obsession with this message and its alleged cover-up, or in what respect he thinks it contributes to his own thesis (other than a theme of cover-up for the sake of cover-up). One plausible motive for such concealment would be that the Admiralty was embarrassed by the contrast between Coke's diligence and its own lethargy, but Simpson does not even state that. If the Admiralty desired to hide a diabolical plot to bring LUSITANIA into U- 20's sights, it would hardly seem logical for it to go to such great lengths to hide an order intended to bring her to safety, even if the directive was at the initiative of Queenstown rather than London.

Bailey and Ryan, after consulting the Admiralty signal books, have a very simple explanation for this message of 1102. The mysterious message was nothing but a codeword, "Questor," to ask a ship which edition of the Merchant Vessel Code it was holding; LUSITANIA's reply, "Westrona," indicated that she held the first edition. Queenstown then went on to pass two submarine warnings to LUSITANIA, the specifics of which are not mentioned.

Bailey and Ryan mention another obvious problem with Simpson's scenario. LUSITANIA was heading east, not north or northeast toward Queenstown, at the time she was torpedoed. They might have mentioned an equally glaring discrepancy. Simpson's violent turn to port occurs at 1215 Greenwich Mean Time. LUSITANIA at this time was about twenty miles off the coast and 45 nautical miles southwest of Queenstown. She was torpedoed at 1410 GMT. Whether making 18 knots (her approximate speed when hit) or 21 knots (her maximum speed with the six deactivated boilers), she would in one hour and 55 minutes have been almost in Queenstown by 1410, rather than thirty-some miles south-southwest of the port. It also seems unlikely that a high-speed run toward the shore of nearly two hours before LUSITANIA's sinking would have completely escaped notice at the time and since.

Many of Colin Simpson's distortions are infuriating. In the end the Queenstown-diversion saga is merely baffling.

[Sources for the Queenstown-diversion question: Simpson pp. 145-47, ch. 11; 175-76, ch. 14; 199-200, ch. 16; 220-22 and 226-27, ch. 17; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 138-40]

BROADER ASPECTS OF THE CONSPIRACY THESIS

Beyond the direct evidence contradicting the conspiracy thesis is the extremely dubious logic of any such plot, resting as it would on the assumption that the liner and the U-boat could be steered into each other and that the sinking of a British liner would result inevitably in a U.S. declaration of war on Germany. Winston Churchill would have been extremely naive about both the temperament of Woodrow Wilson and the state of U.S. military preparedness to have any such notion. Not only did the United States not come close to war with Germany in the aftermath of the disaster, but it would be difficult even to demonstrate that LUSITANIA set in motion an inexorable slide toward war; U.S. relations with the Allies and the Central Powers did not follow a linear course after May 1915, and in fact in late 1916 Washington's relations with the Allies were worse than they had been at any time since the start of the war.

Bailey and Ryan spend a few pages on the broader ramifications of the conspiracy theory. Some of their arguments are rather weak-- Winston Churchill wrote an article in 1937 that strongly condemned the sinking of LUSITANIA, and "this was not the kind of account that one would expect from a statesman harboring a guilty conscience." They make the assertion, plausible but certainly not conclusive, that Britain did not even desire U.S. entry into the war, and the stronger point that Britain at this early stage of the war was not sufficiently desperate for Churchill to conceive of such a plot. They do ultimately sum up the case against the conspiracy well: "Churchill could have been capable of plotting to sink the LUSITANIA, provided that four preconditions had existed. First, Britain would have had to need America badly as an ally. Second, Churchill would have had to have good reason to expect that the United States would fight in in response to the sinking of a valuable British ship. Third, the risk of engineering a plot that involved a considerable number of people would have had to be minimal. Finally, the odds would have had to be heavily in favor of a chain of happenings: a single steamer, while zigzagging at full speed in midchannel [as Turner was directed but failed to do; discussed below], would have had to encounter one of the relatively scarce German submarines in the Irish Channel and then suffer complete destruction, with horrible loss of life. Churchill was no fool. As none of these four preconditions existed, or could have been reasonably thought to exist, we have to dismiss the charge that the First Lord was guilty of premeditated mass murder for reasons of state, including all-encompassing national security." To this statement of Bailey and Ryan's we should add the well-documented succession of warning messages as compelling evidence against any such conspiracy. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 186-91]

Notes for this Section

Note 1: On 19 August 1915 the British freighter NICOSIAN, hauling mules from New Orleans to England, was stopped by U-27 about seventy miles from Queenstown. The submarine fired a warning shot and the crew abandoned ship. The British ship BARALONG, ostensibly a cargo ship but in reality a Q-ship, came on the scene, flying an American flag (this is generally regarded, perhaps surprisingly, as legitimate ruse of war, provided the ship's true colors are displayed before she opens fire). When about a hundred yards from U-27 BARALONG raised her British colors and opened fire, sinking U-27. About six Germans, including the captain, were shot in the water. About six others boarded the deserted NICOSIAN. Royal Marines boarded NICOSIAN with orders to take no prisoners, and the defenseless German sailors were hunted down and shot. Although early British accounts denied that an atrocity had occurred, the incidence was witnessed by neutral American mule-handlers from NICOSIAN who had no reason to invent such a story. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 50-51; Devlin, pp. 413-18](Return to text)

Note 2: Hood is wrongly described by Simpson as a vice admiral. He was in temporary eclipse after serving as commander at Dover, when his superiors believed that U-boats were slipping by his forces and transiting the Channel. When it was discovered that the submarines were rounding the north of the British Isles Hood returned to favor, and in late May 1915 was given commander of Battlecruiser Squadron 3. He was killed in INVINCIBLE when she blew up at Jutland. While both Simpson and Bailey and Ryan describe Coke as a vice admiral, A.A. and Mary Hoehling are almost certainly right in calling him a rear admiral in their 1956 book, "The Last Voyage of the Lusitania"; a local defense command was not the province of three-star admiral. Apart from these LUSITANIA books I can find no mention of Coke in any naval histories of the war, including the multi-volume histories by Corbett, Marder, and Frothingham. (Return to text)

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CAPTAIN TURNER'S RESPONSIBILITY

Captain William Turner's responsibility for the loss of his ship is a matter of considerable controversy. Colin Simpson and some others, like Beesly, treat him as an innocent scapegoat. Bailey and Ryan see him as grossly negligent. Simpson believes that the Admiralty plotted to blame Turner for the disaster, and that he was saved only by Lord Mersey's last-minute conversion after learning of Admiralty duplicity on the alleged Queenstown diversion order (discussed above). Bailey and Ryan, on the other hand, entitle their chapter on the hearings "Lord Mersey's Whitewash of Turner," viewing both hearings as a cover-up of negligence or irresponsibility on the part of the Admiralty, Cunard, and Turner collectively. Both books devote considerable space to the hearings and the question of Turner's culpability, but these matters will be only briefly discussed here. [Apart from specific references below, see more generally Simpson pp. 159-64 in chapter 12, 173-82 in chapter 14, and 215-32 in chapter 17; and Bailey and Ryan, pages 208-25 and 272-307.]

The controversy over Turner centers on his failure to heed standing Admiralty instructions to zigzag, and further admonitions in a message sent to all British ships on 6 May; although this is quoted above in the discussion on warnings, it is significant enough to merit repetition in this context as well: "Between South Foreland and Folkestone keep within two miles of shore and pass between the two light vessels. Take Liverpool pilot at bar. Avoid headlands; pass harbours at full speed; steer mid-channel course. Submarines off Fastnet." Colin Simpson, eager to absolve Turner of any responsibility, deals with the message in this manner: LUSITANIA "acknowledged a general Admiralty instruction sent to all British merchant ships homeward bound. This had hardly concerned the LUSITANIA except that the last phrase had said 'Submarines off Fastnet.'" [Simpson, p. 141, ch. 11; full text in Bailey and Ryan, p 135]

At the outset of the war Cunard had deactivated six of LUSITANIA's twenty- five boilers to save coal and labor, reducing her top speed from 25 to 21 knots. This exceedingly foolish economy measure was obviously beyond the captain's control. On the fatal day, though, Turner reduced speed still further to 18 knots, endeavoring to delay his ship's arrival at Liverpool so that he could come in immediately on the tide, rather than lingering dangerously off a major port and likely submarine hunting ground. He was about twelve miles off the Old Head of Kinsale at the time of the sinking, although the channel at this point was about 140 miles wide. Turner stated that he needed to close the land to obtain a navigational fix before entering St. George's Channel en route to Liverpool.

In the immediate aftermath of the sinking Turner's actions came under heavy criticism from the Admiralty, especially in a memorandum by Captain Richard Webb of the Trade Division. Webb went so far as to suggest treason on the captain's part: "One is forced to conclude that he is either utterly incompetent, or that he has been got at by the Germans. In considering this latter possibility it is not necessary to suppose that he had any conception of the loss of life which actually occurred and he may well have thought that being close to the shore there would be ample time to run his ship into a place of security before she foundered." Fisher endorsed Webb's memo and annotated his copy: "Fully concur. As the Cunard Company would not have employed an incompetent man--the certainty is absolute that Captain Turner is not a fool but a knave!" Whether Fisher seriously believed that Turner was a traitor or was just engaging in characteristic histrionics, this accusation is of course absurd and contemptible; to this degree Simpson is correct in his defense of Turner. Bailey and Ryan, who also quote Fisher's remarks, are remiss in failing to condemn them, letting the accusation pass without comment. [Simpson, pages 179-80, ch. 14; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 179-80]

Bailey and Ryan in most other respects make a good case that Turner was lax and complacent in the face of repeated warnings of the presence of submarines. While the captain was correct in wishing to delay his arrival at Liverpool to meet the tide, Turner could have attained the same object by zigzagging at 21 knots, rather than taking a straight course at 18 knots. Webb suggested as much in his memorandum, which on this point is never convincingly refuted by Simpson, although he avails himself of the observation that "Webb's tactical alternatives are those of a man who would appear likely to have done himself serious injury if allowed to play tactics in his bath."

Simpson and Beesly both argue unconvincingly that Turner might never have received the Admiralty instructions to merchant ships to zigzag, although Turner admitted at the inquest that he had, claiming that he interpreted this to mean that he should zigzag if attacked. Zigzagging, a protracted series of course changes designed to foil the approach of any submarine that might be present, is quite a different matter from an evasive turn under actual attack. In Turner's defense it might be stated that this was all new to merchant captains, but this still does not say a great deal for his acuity.

Admiralty instructions directed captains to take a mid-channel course avoiding headlands, where submarines were most likely to linger. The dispute on Turner's course centers on the definition of "channel." His defenders argue that the term in this context would apply only to the St. George's Channel, and that the waters off Queenstown were still considered the open ocean. Bailey and Ryan contend that this area was routinely referred to as the Irish Channel. "Clearly the intent of the official instructions was that a captain, while in relatively narrow waters, should steer his vessel roughly midway between the two nearest bodies of land....Even if Turner had not been violating his instructions to keep in midchannel, he certainly was ignoring those that related to giving a wide birth to headlands like the Old Head of Kinsale." Turner's justification for his course, the need to take a navigational fix, also does not hold up, in Bailey and Ryan's (presumably the latter) opinion. The four-point bearing on which Turner insisted took forty minutes; he could have used his sextant and some quick visual bearings to fix his position in five minutes. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 209-12]

There is another aspect to Turner's performance on which his defenders exhibit a curious myopia- -the condition of LUSITANIA and the performance of her crew. That the quality and experience of LUSITANIA's crew was well below peacetime standards is clear; Turner himself stated as much at the inquest. All accounts agree that at the time of the torpedo strike many portholes were open, contrary to orders, and contributed substantially to the ship's rapid flooding. There is a similar consensus that the abandonment of LUSITANIA, and in particular the attempted launch of her port-side lifeboats, was a chaotic scene marked by panic and incompetence and, by some accounts, by cowardice on the part of some crew members who ignored the plight of the passengers. [Simpson, pp. 159-64, ch. 13 and pp. 215-18, ch. 17; Bailey and Ryan, pp. 130-33, 171-73, 301-3]

Simpson fully concurs in this, and gives a vivid description of the scene. Yet he never sees the inconsistency between this and his blanket defense of Captain Turner. Who, if not the commanding officer, is responsible for the training of the crew and the material condition of the ship? If Turner himself recognized the poor state of his crew, why was he not drilling them intensively during the passage? LUSITANIA's lifeboat drills, in particular, were pathetic. A few crew members--not passengers--would climb into a single lifeboat, put lifebelts on, and climb out again--without working the falls or lowering the boats. Criticism of this farce is not mere hindsight. On 4 May, three days before the disaster, several passengers asked Captain Turner to conduct boat drills for the passengers. Turner assured the passengers that there was no danger to fear but promised to speak to the First Officer about a drill; it never happened. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 130-32]

Turner was not alone in his complacency. But the evidence is compelling that, as the captain of a ship entrusted with the lives of over 1,200 passengers, heading into a channel where U-boats were known to be operating, he displayed an appalling nonchalance and lack of judgement.

THE SECOND EXPLOSION

The detonation of Schwieger's torpedo at 1410 on 7 May was soon followed by a second, larger explosion, which was clearly the cause of LUSITANIA's rapid sinking and thus of the extremely heavy loss of life. The official British wartime view was that U-20 had fired a second torpedo. Schwieger's log contradicts this, and no evidence has surfaced to support it. The second torpedo is a dead issue, perhaps the only LUSITANIA controversy that has been solved in the last eighty-four years.

There remains some controversy over the location of the torpedo. The official British wartime inquiries placed the impact of both supposed torpedoes roughly amidships. Simpson and many others dispute this, citing the log of U-20 that states: "Shot strikes starboard side right behind the bridge." This places the torpedo somewhere near the bulkhead between the no. 1 boiler room and a transverse coal bunker just forward of it; further forward is the cargo hold. In Simpson's view, the British attempted to cover up the true location of the torpedo detonation to conceal the cause of the second explosion, which he attributes to the secret cargo of powder. As previously noted there is little evidence, and less logic, to support the presence of such a cargo on LUSITANIA. Simpson nonetheless almost certainly is right about the location of the torpedo strike. No strong evidence exists to dispute Schwieger's periscope observations, nor did he have any reason to falsify them. The testimony of witnesses on the liner is conflicting.

Patrick Beesly attributes the second explosion to the ship's cargo, but his theory is very different from Simpson's. Beesly does not believe that a secret cargo of powder was present--one of several significant points on which he explicitly parts company with Simpson--but attributes the explosion to the detonation of the "filled" shrapnel cases, triggered by the explosion of fulminate of mercury in the cargo of fuzes. We have already discussed Beesly and Simpson's evident misunderstanding of the nature of shrapnel, and the near certainty that these cases were filled only with metallic fragments; shrapnel shells in any case have very small explosive charges. [Beesly, p.114]

This is the weakest point of Bailey and Ryan's book. They, seemingly alone among recent authors, place the torpedo explosion between the first and second funnels, in keeping with the findings of the British court of inquiry (on which they are generally quite scathing). They do not account for Schwieger's observations. They further decide that it is a "virtual certainty" that the second explosion was caused by the rupture of LUSITANIA's boilers, induced by the torpedo explosion and the inrush of cold water. There are several problems with such a theory. As Simpson correctly argues, none of the survivors from the firerooms reported any boiler explosions. The detonation of a boiler by a torpedo would require almost a direct impact on the boiler itself, a near impossibility--especially when longitudinal coal bunkers separated the boilers from the hull. Boilers furthermore do not explode in succession; the detonation of one does not lead to secondary explosions in others analogous to the detonation of a chain of explosives. The common notion of boiler explosions caused by the inrush of cold water is in all probability a myth; hundreds of ships suffered flooded firerooms in the two world wars, and I am unaware of a single case in which a boiler exploded as a result. [Bailey and Ryan, pp. 100, 150, 166-67, 253, 294, 304; Simpson, pp. 150-51]

A third theory has arisen in recent years, prompted in part by explorations of the wreck. These observations do not directly tell us the location of the torpedo impact, because LUSITANIA is lying on her starboard side and the hole is hidden. But they have contributed further insights on the second explosion. In "Exploring the LUSITANIA," Robert Ballard and Spencer Dunmore report that the magazine spaces are undamaged, strongly arguing against a detonation of explosive cargo. They report that chunks of coal are lying all around the ship, and suggest this as evidence the second explosion was the ignition of coal dust, stirred by the torpedo impact. Two possible objections to this theory present themselves, although without scientific expertise it is difficult to judge their import. It would seem, intuitively at least, that an explosion in a coal bunker of sufficient force to doom the ship would be more likely to pulverize the coal than to scatter it (however, see note 1). Further, while Ballard and Dunsmore base their case in part on the argument that "LUSITANIA burned bituminous goal, a highly combustible type," this requires qualification. The preferred marine coal was semi-bituminous, a very hard form of bituminous or "soft" coal, with a much lower level of ash and volatile matter than standard bituminous; a crack ship like LUSITANIA almost certainly would have been burning Welsh Admiralty or a similar grade of semi-bituminous coal. Despite these possible weaknesses the coal-dust theory remains the best at this date, although more by process of elimination than by its intrinsic persuasiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Two basic issues are raised in the LUSITANIA controversies: the propriety of the German action in sinking the ship, and the accusation that the British deliberately sent her into danger. These are entirely independent questions, although they are at times emotionally linked--e.g. those who support the German side of the first question sometimes want to believe that Winston Churchill plotted LUSITANIA's destruction, presumably to further deflect guilt from Germany.

LUSITANIA was not carrying a secret, illegal cargo of explosives. She was carrying a legal consignment of rifle cartridges and shrapnel shell cases. In traditional international law this did not affect LUSITANIA's status as a merchant ship, entitled to full warning before attack. But Bailey and Ryan are right in suggesting that in a moral and practical sense LUSITANIA's military cargo does enhance the German argument that U-20 had a right to sink her, although it certainly does not seal the case. A more potent argument for the German case is the secret Admiralty orders, known to the Germans, that directed merchant ships to resist and to ram U-boats and made it highly perilous to surface and give warning. In the new circumstances of this naval war, in which both sides were in violation of traditional law, a coldly objective judgement is that LUSITANIA was a legitimate target--a conclusion reached with reluctance and with which others I am sure will strongly disagree. That being said, her sinking was a brutal act even by the standards of this war, and there is reason to think that there were U-boat commanders who would have shown greater forbearance in the circumstances than did Kapitanleutnant Schwieger; there are few submarine captains, of Germany or any other nation, who can be said with certainty to have deliberately attacked a hospital ship.

There can be no such ambivalence on the question of the LUSITANIA conspiracy. The plot described by Colin Simpson would require not only extraordinary perfidy but an implausible degree of naivete on the part of Winston Churchill and others in the British leadership about America's readiness for war, in both the political and military senses. No evidence has ever surfaced to support such a conspiracy; Colin Simpson's one shred of positive evidence, the "eyewitness account" of Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy, is beyond reasonable doubt an invention, and only the most egregious of the numerous distortions in this inexpressibly dishonest book.

Notes for this Section

Note 1 - in this instance,by the "editor" William Schleihauf (william@cae.ca) - I've been diving on a number of wrecks, including that of HMS *Vanguard*, which blew up in Scapa Flow 1917. Although some coal might be 'pulverised' in the explosion, much of it does indeed get scattered. It is quite likely that there would be a fair amount of coal strewn around the wreck of *Lusitania* in the event of a coal dust explosion. (Return to text)

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